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CONTACT: Patricia Viets, NOAA
(301) 457-5005

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**171 PEOPLE RESCUED IN THE U.S. IN 2002
WITH HELP FROM NOAA SATELLITES**

Thanks to environmental satellites with search and rescue tracking capability, the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) helped save 171 lives in the United States in 2002.

The NOAA satellites, along with Russia's Cospas satellites, are part of an international Search and Rescue Satellite-Aided Tracking System known as Cospas-Sarsat. Together, the system uses a constellation of satellites in geostationary and polar orbits to detect and locate emergency beacons on vessels and aircraft in distress and from hand-held Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs). India and the European Space Agency also provide geostationary satellites for the Cospas-Sarsat System.

Of the 171 rescues last year, 133 people were saved on the nation's seas, 27 in the Alaska wilderness and 11 from downed aircraft in states around the country. Of the 69 separate SARSAT rescue events, a variety took place out at sea.

Engine fires, flooding and rough seas all caused emergencies resulting in distress calls and rescues. In Alaska, stranded snowmobilers and lost persons were among those rescued. Downed aircraft incidents included those making emergency landings. In one such incident, a Piper Supercub had flipped after landing near Glenallen, Alaska. Both the pilot and passenger were uninjured.

"One of NOAA's missions is to protect lives and property," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph.D., undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "The SARSAT System is a great example of how we work to achieve that goal every day." More than 15,000 lives have been saved worldwide since the system became operational in 1982 and nearly 4,500 in the United States alone. September 2002 marked the 20th anniversary of the first Sarsat rescue.

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"It is our business to save lives," said Ajay Mehta, manager of NOAA's SARSAT program. "We are an international humanitarian program whose goals and rewards are based on this premise." NOAA's National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NOAA Satellites and Information) operates the SARSAT U.S. Mission Control Center (USMCC) in Suitland, Md., and represents the United States in the international program by providing satellites, ground stations and the mission control center.

In one dramatic rescue, a father, a son and their family dog were plucked from a life raft in the Gulf of Alaska about 90 miles south of Cordova, Alaska. "These folks were in a dangerous predicament," said Mehta. "Their fishing vessel had struck an object and sustained uncontrollable flooding causing them to abandon their vessel. Yet, because there was an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon, or EPIRB, on board that was manually activated, a U.S. Coast Guard search and rescue helicopter was able to respond to the distress quickly once the alert information was received from the USMCC." On arrival the helicopter saw the situation unfolding and deployed a rescue swimmer to retrieve the three occupants and bring them to safety.

This particular incident illustrates the importance of emergency beacon registration. "Because these folks had current registration information, we were able to quickly determine the route they were taking, the number of people on board, and their vessel's description," said Petty Officer Doug Green, of the 17th Coast Guard District Rescue Coordination Center in Juneau. "You'd be amazed at how much having that information helps us do our job." All EPIRBs, Emergency Locator Transmitters (ELTs) found on aircraft, and Personal Locator Beacons in the United States are required by law to be registered with NOAA's SARSAT Program office.

NOAA expects the number of worldwide rescues for 2002 will total about 1,500. Numbers will be available this spring, as countries around the world report their rescues to the international Cospas-Sarsat organization. "The average number of distress alerts continues to rise internationally as more countries sign on to use the advantages and benefits of the Cospas-Sarsat system," said Mehta.

NOAA's Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES) can instantly detect emergency distress signals. The polar-orbiting satellites in the system detect emergency signals as they circle the Earth from pole to pole. The signals are sent to the Mission Control Centers, then automatically sent to rescue forces around the world. Today there are 35 countries participating in the system.

NOAA Satellites and Information is the nation's primary source of operational space-based meteorological and climate data. In addition to search and rescue, NOAA's environmental satellites are used for weather forecasting, climate monitoring, and other environmental applications such as volcanic eruptions, ozone monitoring, sea surface temperature measurements, and wild fire detection.

NOAA Satellites and Information also operates three data centers, which house global data bases in climatology, oceanography, solid earth geophysics, marine geology and geophysics, solar-terrestrial physics, and paleoclimatology.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

To learn more about NOAA, please visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.

For more on NOAA Satellites and Information, visit: <http://www.nesdis.noaa.gov>

Learn more about NOAA's role in the Cospas-Sarsat program:
<http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov>

Note to Editors and Producers: To arrange a media visit to the U.S. Mission Control Center in Suitland, Md., call Patricia Viets at (301) 457-5005.